

Bio-Theology

Introduction

Biopolitics espouses the theological view of bios insofar as life is viewed as a precious, unique gift. Any living thing partakes of and reflects the perfection of creation in its natural beauty. "Look at the field lilies," preached Christ. "They do not worry about their clothes. Yet King Solomon in all his glory was not clothed as beautifully as they." 1

Bios as the Sacred Gift

Religion enhances the importance of the global bios body and of the interdependence of its parts and ideas which coincide with the views characteristic of many current secular trends of thought. However, theology introduces an extra dimension to the unity of bios as well. This eternal existence and development of bios in its manifold forms is perceived as the melody of God's love for humankind, for bio-environment, for the whole animated world. The fact that God has created this beautiful world as a habitable place for humanity answering our vital needs is implicit in the words of Vassilios the Great: "the world be mild and beneficial for us, the rains peaceful to the Earth for fruition." 2

The infinite chain of individual creatures constituting the bios body continuous both in space and time is the force able to "perforate the darkness of Death." 3 This belief in final victory of life over death is the intrinsic part of the theological teachings. This great belief makes us confident that we will be able to overcome the destructive tendencies threatening both man and bio-environment, such as narcotics, abortion, suicide, war and pollution. 3

Consider the problems of present-day humanity in terms of its detachment from God. It is emphasized that our age is the time of explored extrovertness characterized by rapid increase in the main material means of survival and the acquisition of self-gratification. 3 However, enhancement of the means to a commodious life through science and technology leads to a greater insecurity within the realm of creation. Under these circumstances spiritual aspiration:

- defends the values of humanity against the tendency of depersonalization;
- provides ethical strength for the development of self-control, humility and liberation from egocentrism;
- promotes the positive values of love, friendship and creation.

These values acquire special importance if fostered together with the belief in God.

Religion and Unity of Bios

Modern human society places special emphasis on the individuality of each human being, on personal freedoms, rights and peculiarities. This contemporary focus on the individual conforms to the religious idea of uniqueness of every human life and of its absolute value. Every human being is considered the Crown of Creation.

Religion also teaches us that all human beings are connected by spiritual bonds. They are all interdependent and interrelated. The harm done to any human being will inevitably also affect the rest of humanity. In this sense, we can speak of one body of humanity. 4 According to the Bible, all human beings irrespective of their race and nation, have descended from Adam and Eve. Unexpectedly, some evidence in favor of this statement has been obtained in modern biology. Mitochondrial DNA analysis in 150 humans from different regions of the world has revealed that all the humans are apparently descendants of the same woman. The scientists refer to her as Eve. 5

In accord with the religious views, all forms of bios form one integral entity. They are parts of the whole with each part performing its specific function. New connections between science and religion are being established today on the basis of neurological and psychological research. 6

Liaison between Biopolitics and Religion

The idea that God's Love is the spiritual foundation of life permeates the scriptures of most religious texts. The participants of the Assisi Interfaith Conference in September, 29, 1986 representing the five major religions of the world; Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam and Judaism unanimously and categorically stated that their beliefs led them to conservation of bios. 7 More importantly is that all the major religious traditions of Asia "despite apparent variations and differences,... exemplify certain unifying perceptions regarding man and man's relationship with nature",8 the environment and bios.

The Buddhist Attitude

The Buddhists consider the Buddha "the Being who saw the interdependence of Nature." 8 This universal interdependence of the things and events in the world is emphasized by the notion of karma. In the Buddha's words, "because the cause was there, the consequences followed." The world is filled with life, both manifest and cryptic. "Various spirits and forms are dormant in the rivers, mountains, lakes and trees."

The Buddhist philosophy is founded on love, understanding and compassion. The attitude of people towards other living things should be based on these feelings, since all forms of life are closely related to ourselves. Animals are considered sentient beings. "They too, just like the human species, primarily seek happiness and shun suffering." 9 According to the universal karma law applying also to animals, a positive (good) action leads finally to happiness, whereas a negative (wrong or bad) action causes suffering. Thus, current bio-environmental problems can be seen as the result of negative human actions and they can only be overcome if positive actions are taken without delay. According to the Dalai Lama: "Disregard for the natural inheritance of human beings has brought about the danger that now threatens the peace of the world as well as the chance of endangered species to live."

Buddhism stresses the intrinsic unity of man and bio-environment. "This Buddhist phrase which is 1200 years old is a strong example of this unity: to study Buddhism is to study yourself; to study yourself is to forget yourself; to forget yourself is to be one with all things. So when you are with nature, you are with Buddhism. This is the ecological side of Buddhism." 10

The Hinduist Attitude

Hindu philosophy emphasizes the importance of all forms of bios as beings having spiritual dimension. The Hindu texts stress the great rhythms of nature and their dependence on divine power. "The divine expresses itself through natural phenomena." 11 The whole world, as follows from the Vedas, is penetrated by the same unifying spiritual power. According to the ancient spiritual tradition, man is looked upon as part of nature, part of the bio-environment¹¹.

In agreement with the sacred Hindu texts, animals should be treated as children. They are also to be worshipped as sacred, since each divinity is associated with a particular animal and bird. The texts of the Vaishnava stress the spiritual links between human beings and animals which have been established as a result of a series of reincarnations. The postulated sequence of stages of development is as follows: fish, amphibians, mammals, humans. These views foreshadow the modern evolutionary concept. The Jainist and the Vaishnava traditions place emphasis on the law of harmlessness, ahimsa which applies also to the way humanity should treat animals. "No person should kill animals." 11 Also the forests and groves are regarded as sacred. Thus all life is regarded with spiritual reverence.

The Muslim Attitude

The Muslims see the entire Universe as God's creation. Mankind is the trustee of God on Earth, khalifa. "We are not makers of the Earth, we are God's agents." 12 Our duty is to maintain peace and submit to the will of God. The Muslim church holds man responsible for the whole world and, in particular, for the bio-environment. As contained in the Koran, "the world is green and beautiful and God has appointed you [humans] his stewards over it." 12 Depending on whether or not a human being fulfills this important mission, they have the potential to acquire a status higher than that of the angels or sink lower than the lowliest of the beasts." 12 The accountability of human beings for their behaviour is called akhrah. Islam is considered the "guidance of how to live today so that we can face akhrah."

The classical Muslim jurist Izz ad-Din ibn Abd as-Salam considered the problem of animal rights legislation as early as in the 13th century. This is in agreement with the Muslim doctrine of the Unity of God (Allah)- tawheed. This Unity is reflected in the unity of humankind and nature. In accord with the Muslim doctrine, the righteous should prefer the middle path in life. This implies avoiding extremes and maintaining balance and harmony; promoting nature, promoting bio-environment is a godly mission. "Whoever plants a tree and diligently looks after it until it matures and bears fruit is rewarded." 12 The practical steps envisaged by the Muslim religion, the shariat, include creation of haram zones, non-violent zones and hina, which are all preserves established for the conservation of wildlife and forests.

The Hebrew Attitude

Drawing upon the Old Testament, the Jewish philosophy states that Adam had sworn "to live in harmony" with all God's creatures. 13 Thus, at the very beginning of time, man accepted responsibility before God for all of creation. Judaism also teaches people to be merciful to all living things. "Whoever is merciful to all creatures is a descendant of our ancestor Abraham." 13 Those believing in Judaism should therefore engage in activities aimed at maintaining and promoting bios.

In the Ecclesiastes it is written: "When the Holy One... created the first man, He took him and warned him about all the trees of the Garden of Eden, saying: `See My works, how beautiful and perfect they are, and all this I created for you. Beware, lest you spoil and destroy my world. For if you spoil it there is no one to repair it for you.'" A heavy responsibility lies on the shoulders of all the citizens of the world, to ensure the continuity of the world for future generations. 14

The Christian Attitude

The Church is concerned with humanity, the bio-environment and their interrelation in performing the sacrament of Holy Communion as well as in everyday life. 2 Clergymen regard the important mission of preserving the bio-environment and of promoting bios values in human culture as consistent with theological teachings. It aims to safeguard the bio-environment. The Christian religion stresses the role of all earthly creatures: "Through their interdependence they should bring to perfection the beauty of the Universe." 14

The bios body is regarded as holy. Not only are the creatures on Earth interdependent, they also depend on God and His love. Life is dependent on communion with God. Detachment from God ultimately results in dis-harmony. 3

According to St. Gregory, man is "of blended nature, King of all upon earth, but subject to heaven; earthly and heavenly. Therefore, man's dominion is not license to abuse, and spoil." "Every human act of irresponsibility against that divine wisdom which sustains and gives purpose to the interdependent harmony of the universe." 15

Christianity is characterized by an age-old tradition of taking care of the bio-environment, of nurturing and fostering animals and tending plants. St. Francis of Assisi whose residence provided the site of the important inter-religion meeting referred to was submissive to all creatures and scanned creation attentively, listening to its mysterious voices. The Benedictine monks considered their mission as a "stewardship of natural resources, a harmonious union between prayer and work." 15

The Orthodox Ecumenical Patriarchate regards as its task the continuation and preservation of the meaning of life on our planet. It also stresses, in this general bio-environmental context, the singularity of every human being. The Orthodox Church teaches people to respect bios, observe and study its majesty, regard "any little creature as being the presence of the Creator." 16

In carrying out the mission of safeguarding and promoting bios, people thus promote basic religious principles. Spiritual support of religion, therefore, will be provided for them.

Thus, science currently provides new dimensions of the idea of the unity of bios including human beings. "The further we penetrate into the submicroscopic world, the more we come to see the world as a system of inseparable, interacting and ever-moving components, with man as an integral part of the system." Fritjof Capra remarks in *The Tao of Physics*, "In such a world, scientific discoveries can be in perfect harmony with religious beliefs." 6

Objectives:

- to promote the concepts of the body of humanity⁴ and of the bios body, 4 to sensitize the people to the intrinsic unity of humankind and bio-environment;
- to enhance the importance of bios for the spiritual development of human personalities;
- to set a discussion on bios as a concept of convergence of different religious philosophies and theological approaches;
- to emphasize that maintenance of the bio-environment and harmonious co-existence with all forms of bios are in full agreement with the principal religions, to draw the attention of believers throughout the Earth to the pressing problems concerning bios.

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